

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICE
CLEVELAND, OHIO 44106
TELEPHONE (216) 421-7340

FOR RELEASE THURSDAY, APRIL 8, 1976

A majestic canvas depicting the martyrdom of Saint Andrew the Apostle, painted by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) and presumed lost for more than 300 years, has been acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art, Director Sherman E. Lee announced today (April 8, 1976).

The painting, which dates from the last three years of Caravaggio's life, is a work of powerful intensity, recreating one of the most dramatic accounts of the death of Christ's first disciple.

The story -- recounted in early Latin texts but infrequently represented -- tells of Saint Andrew's martyrdom at Patras where he is bound to a cross, but continues to preach for two days before dying. The city's proconsul, fearing a riot by the aroused public, orders the apostle taken down from the cross. As a young man reaches up from a ladder to release the saint, who is now near death, the youth is stricken with a supernatural paralysis and held immobile.

It is this climactic moment Caravaggio has chosen to portray the extraordinary spiritual event: the martyred saint in the instant which separates life from death, the young man frozen in motion, two onlookers -- a soldier and another man -- gaping in astonishment, an old woman, grim-faced and silent.

"Caravaggio was the most powerful, original, and influential Italian painter of his age," Dr. Lee says. "The psychological insight and tense, inventive composition characteristic of his late works is fully embodied in this picture.

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"With our other 17th century Italian paintings by masters such as Guido Reni and Orazio Gentileschi," Dr. Lee continues, "the Martyrdom of Saint Andrew provides both a historical keystone for the collection and a deeply moving work by a creative genius."

The painting, an oil on canvas measuring approximately seven feet high by five feet wide, has been identified as the lost original brought from Italy to Spain in 1610 by the Conde de Benavente, Spanish Viceroy in Naples from 1603 to 1610, and described in the 1653 inventory of paintings belonging to the Benavente family.

After the 17th century the painting dropped from sight, and has been known until recent times primarily through copies in museums at Toledo (Spain) and Dijon, and a private collection in Switzerland.

It unexpectedly reappeared in 1973 in an exhibition entitled Caravaggio and Spanish Naturalism held at the Alcazar in Seville. At that time in the Arnaiz Collection, Madrid, the painting was exhibited as "Caravaggio (?) Martyrdom of Saint Philip (?)." The uncertainties expressed were due to then existing confusion about the iconography and precise subject matter of the picture, and the crude overpainting of one of the faces occasioned by damage to the canvas. Like most large paintings of the early Italian baroque, the picture has damages, Dr. Lee says, but is in good condition.

Subsequently, extensive research has been done on the composition, as well as technical examination (including x-ray which revealed that the artist had completely altered the placing of one of the figure's hands). The result of these findings -- representing the work of Benedict Nicolson, editor of The Burlington Magazine; Denis Mahon of London; and Richard Spear of Oberlin College --

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confirms the painting as the one described in the Benavente inventory as an original by Caravaggio and given the highest value in the inventory appraisals -- 1500 ducats.

"This mature masterpiece by Caravaggio admirably represents the major contribution made by him in his late works," Denis Mahon states, "and is in my judgment the most distinguished 17th century Italian painting in America."

Mr. Mahon, who has been in Cleveland to study the painting, places the canvas with those done by Caravaggio during his first sojourn in Naples in 1607, and assigns it chronologically between the Seven Acts of Mercy in the church of Monte della Misericordia in Naples, for which the artist was paid on January 9, 1607, and the Saint Jerome Writing, probably painted at Naples towards the end of 1607 and sent to Malta where it was placed in the church of San Giovanni.

The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew was acquired by the Cleveland Museum from the London art dealers Leggatt Brothers. It is the first painting by Caravaggio to enter the Museum's collections, and one of only five works by this master in the United States.

It goes on view today in the Museum's gallery of Baroque paintings on the second floor.

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For additional information or photographs, please contact Frances Stamper, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; (216)421-7340.